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ABSTRACT

This interview with Lewis J. Perelman examines issues raised by his recent book, "School's Out" (1992), which describes the current educational system as an obsolete technology that is rapidly being replaced by the new metaprocess of hyperlearning. Hyperlearning will combine teaching and learning with artificial intelligence, broadband telecommunications, information processing, and biotechnology to transform the world's economic order. This style of learning will emphasize active, student-directed experiences rather than institutionalized, teacher-directed instruction. The present educational system is less and less able to meet the needs of rapid change exhibited in industry and society. Perelman observes that community colleges are in a better position to adapt to these changes than other segments of higher education, since community colleges are generally more flexible and consumer-orientated, and already serve in many ways as community learning centers open to all individuals. He maintains that the one great strength of the American educational system is its great diversity, a factor that may allow it to adapt more easily to change than more centralized systems found elsewhere in the world. (MDM)

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Background Briefing Paper

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Learning Without Education*

An Interview With Lewis J. Perelman
by Douglas Easterling
Sinclair Community College

AAHE's 9th Annual Assessment & Quality Conference, to be held June 12-15, 1994, in Washington, D.C., has as its theme "Involvement in Learning." However, a number of commentators now suggest that education should not be involved in learning at all; indeed, they assert that the educational system itself is detrimental to learning. Lewis J. Perelman is at the forefront of this movement. His book School's Out *(1992, William Morrow & Company; 1993, Avon Books) delivers a provocative analysis of education as an obsolete technology that is rapidly being replaced by the new metaprocess of hyperlearning. Perelman's views have begun to draw attention in a number of circles outside of education, and they merit the attention of those of us in higher education because of their potential implications for the future of the academy. Perelman, who holds a doctorate in social policy from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has been a high school physics teacher, scientist, corporate planner, and policy and management consultant. He is an adjunct senior fellow at the Discovery Institute and was formerly the director of Project Learning 2001, a study of the restructuring of education and training sponsored by twelve American corporations and foundations. What follows is an interview with Perelman by Douglas Easterling, director of institutional planning and research at Sinclair Community College.*

Easterling: You state in *School's Out* that learning will be the key activity of the new, knowledge-based economy. What distinction do you draw between learning and education, and why is that distinction so important in this economy?

Perelman: The key is the difference between a transitive and intransitive act, between active and passive. A good analogy is the difference between going trout fishing and ordering trout in a restaurant. The end result is that you're going to sit down and eat trout, but no trout fisherman thinks that one experience is anywhere near the other. The reward of the fishing experience is the totality of doing it yourself. The fishing experience is one that can't be improved upon by having some organization take charge of doing all the work for you – growing the fish in a fish farm, putting it in a truck, freezing it, shipping it, and putting it on your plate. While it may seem that having all that work done for you is a better was to achieve the same result, it isn't. It's the experience that is significant, not the end result.

I make the distinction between learning as an active, personal venture and education as an

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institutionalized, bureaucratic process. Even though people think that learning and education have something to do with each other, thematically or rhetorically, the relationship between the two is about as similar as the relationship between the dinner of the cooked farm trout and the wild one you've caught yourself. That's the functional distinction I'm making.

This distinction is so important because there is emerging an economic exigency about which of these two types of processes -- learning or education -- has the greater value in terms of what people need. In *School's Out* -- and even more so during the past year -- I have emphasized that the key business process technology of the twenty-first century will be what I call "hyperlearning." Hyperlearning will fuse teaching and learning with artificial intelligence, broadband telecommunications, information processing, and biotechnology to transform the world's economic order.

In business, traditional learning was synonymous with training and education in a classroom. People I talk to in business today tell me that such a concept of learning is not the solution but the problem. What I'm hearing is that education is not merely inefficient, it's the wrong thing, and it's harmful, destructive. Education has acquired a set of ideas, beliefs, visions, skills, and behaviors that are economically -- and therefore socially -- counterproductive.

Easterling: So you are saying that economic change is changing the way we think about learning and education?

Perelman: There are different modalities of learning, and people can learn different things from those different modalities depending upon how their brains are wired. Learning processes can be observed only through what we call skill or practice, which, at the macro level, is seeing what people do as a result of having learned something. At the micro level, there are actual changes in the brain as a result of learning. At either level, we do not observe any difference between education or training. Rhetoric often lags behind the substance of reality, so we're having difficulty knowing what to call this change that is going on.

In the business world, the rhetoric is gradually being reformulated to catch up with new behaviors. That's not unusual or even surprising. Last year, I coined the term "hypermation" to try to describe what's going on. I was inspired to do so by the work of John Diebold, who coined the term "automation" in the early 1950s. He was trying to describe what he saw happening in American industry during and after World War II, a change that was basically a unifying metaprocess for the organization of modern industry. What I've seen happening in the last few years leads me to believe that we're going through another transformation process, but we lack the vocabulary to describe it. Hypermation is a set of process technologies that merge the simulation power of virtual reality with the just-in-time learning of "performance support systems."

What I have found is that the accelerating pace of the development of these performance support systems is driven by the need of the organizations using them to stay competitive in the marketplace. The scientists and engineers keep coming up with new technological structures that can be applied to solving the problem of competition. Performance support is turning out to be a key to competitiveness. It has cultural implications in terms of flattening the hierarchy, reducing the chain of command, empowering the frontline worker to solve the customer's problem. So implementation of these technologies requires radical changes in the way you are organized to do work. This usually means cutting your head count because you have too many people involved in getting the work done, so there have to be transformations in power, hierarchy, etcetera so that people can use these new tools to the greatest effect.

A vice president in charge of business process redesign for a major financial services company recently told me that his biggest problem is people who don't understand how learning really works. As an example, he cited a situation where he showed one of his managers a process chart that clearly indicated that the manager's department was creating a bottleneck. The manager realized this and agreed,

but how did he respond to this revelation? The manager went back to his department and started issuing orders and cracking the whip to get everybody to work harder at what he told them to do. The vice president said that this was exactly the opposite form of behavior he was hoping to inspire in the manager.

Easterling: So you are saying, then, that education perpetuates the behavior exhibited by this manager?

Perelman: That's what the vice president thinks. He said this manager is very smart and well educated -- he has a masters degree from one of the top business schools. And that is where he learned this kind of behavior. The manager is acting like a professor, and that is the problem.

What this manager learned in school is a disease his company is trying to cure. He doesn't understand that the bottom line in process reengineering is for the workers to learn for themselves, to learn how to make the process work so they will know how the way they do their jobs every day affects the customers' needs. The company wants the workers to discover that, to see it, to grasp it -- not to be taught it but to *learn* it. The tools the company is using -- expert systems, performance support systems, computer simulations -- help make the discovery process available to the workers. The workers are in the best position to take the lead in what is essentially an organizational learning process. Now, two years after I wrote *School's Out*, executives like this vice president are telling me that the most-educated people are the biggest barrier to change because they think they know what learning means, and they're wrong.

Easterling: Don't you think education is resilient enough to adapt to the kind of learning the economy now needs?

Perelman: Education, as most people understand it today, is a nineteenth-century invention for an industrial age. The educational institutions with which most of us are familiar are industrial-age factories designed to produce graduates who will fit into a bureaucratic structure. Education has completely adapted itself to an economy that is becoming obsolete. In a similar fashion, the Communist Party was adapted for the Communist State, both of which, incidentally, placed great emphasis on public education. So education has become a state industry along the same lines as classic state industries in socialist economies. It's the same fundamental design philosophy: an industrial concept of large-scale production. Maybe that's a fabulous idea within that old context, but when you take it out of that context, it's literally like a beached whale.

Educational institutions as we know them now aren't very likely to reform, transform, or rectify themselves. Russia is like this on a larger scale. Virtually the entire Russian economy was based on the defense industry. There have been some little successes -- some niches where somebody has the right idea, can get some people together, and actually convert a tank plant into a tractor factory. At the margins, some people will figure ways to do that, but by and large, you've just got too much large-scale obsolescence and too much dead wood and inflexibility built into these institutions. Too many of the people in them have grown up with them, and their very tenure makes their adaptability very narrow. So I don't see education adapting any more effectively.

Easterling: It sounds to me like you're saying that education isn't going to meet the productivity needs of this new economy. What do you think we ought to be looking at, or how should we try to define productivity in terms of this new economy?

Perelman: Well, that's a good question. The first thing about productivity is that doing the wrong thing cannot be productive. The first thing it has to be is relevant. One has to produce the right thing, which

brings us back to the fundamental distinction between a state industry and a market economy. The basic problem with state industries is that they don't have any way to acquire market signals, and therefore they don't know what the right thing is. This is the pathetic, if not tragic, situation we see in Russia now. Once again the regime of bureaucrats -- professional, lifelong nomenclatura -- are trying to justify their existence by preserving big state factories and making them more efficient. They don't get it. They don't understand that you can't be efficient if you don't have a market to compete in because you don't know what the customer wants. The only way you can do that is through the marketplace and through the information that competition creates.

The reason the marketplace is such a powerful engine of innovation is that it creates information. Prices contain information. They tell people what other people want and how much they want it and what they're willing to do to get it. That's incredibly valuable information. With it you can go out and do survey research and focus groups and other things to get it more refined, to identify niches and segments. But without that competitive force of free consumers being able to make choices in a marketplace, that information doesn't exist.

Easterling: So if the marketplace defines productivity, and learning ought to promote that productivity, then what would you say about accountability?

Perelman: Markets measure behavior, not intentions. People can't just talk, they have to commit, to take risks, to put up their own money, their own time, their own energy. The form in which they make their choices then says many different things from what they say on surveys. For instance, most surveys indicate that the American people are willing to pay higher taxes to improve education. What really matters, though, is how they vote on a bond issue. It's the same thing with national standards for education. Most people think they're a good idea, but that doesn't really tell us anything. What matters is the specific standards you want your child or your family to be held accountable to, and there is no consensus on that. So having a consensus that standards in general are a good idea doesn't solve the problem of implementing them.

A point I made at some length in my book is that accounting precedes accountability. It is more important to know what the accounting system is than it is to understand the philosophical desirability of accountability. Everybody is in favor of accountability. The question is -- accountability for what? And how are you going to know? The problem is that as soon as government gets into the act, the whole issue becomes politicized. You can get accountability for the wrong things in the wrong form with the wrong measures.

These new learning technologies that make competency possible are totally contradictory to the quest for institutional accountability. Our goal should be to make sure that content is fully grasped, that everybody gets an A. National goals, national standards are really absurd policy. These national assessment standards, for instance, represent a consensus among people from various walks of life who are ostensibly non-partisan. But the standards are bound to be the product of political manipulation.

In reality, consensus doesn't mean squat. Markets don't run on consensus. Markets run on expressions of personal preference. What markets do is to differentiate supply in an effort to satisfy each individual's demand. The essential idea in all markets is the idea of utility. The fundamental irrationality and error of the whole academic-cum-socialist, or socialism-cum-academia, model is the idea that there is some elite group that can decide what everybody else ought to buy or like or want to know. This is the argument for national standards.

Easterling: Do you see any segment of academia that is responding to the kind of marketplace accountability you describe?

Perelman: Community colleges seem to have the best prospects for being adaptive. On balance, I think community colleges are in a better position to find some continuity -- perhaps even thrive -- in the future than are most of the other so-called educational institutions. The reason for this is that so many of the failures for which community colleges are blamed are, in my view, their successes. By and large, as academic institutions, community colleges are pretty much a flop. This is a good thing because what they really do, even though we call then educational or academic institutions, is function as community learning centers. They are much more consumer-oriented, much more pragmatic, much more culturally attuned to the idea that people who come to them want to learn specific things to accomplish tangible goals in their lives. Consequently, community colleges are very eclectic, very diverse; they exist as resources to help people accomplish what they want. In most cases, this doesn't entail acquiring a diploma. Community colleges get blamed for that, but their students really appreciate it. And that's where I see their strength. Because they're poor relatives of the academic empire, they've tended to be more technologically innovative, more adroit, and somewhat more efficient in finding ways to get the job done.

Most other educational institutions are just terribly, terribly archaic. They're run by very nice people who, in most cases, have neither the skills nor the vision to know what to do differently. Some number of them will realize that and move on, retool themselves, while others, like the Soviet nomenclatura, will use their organized political power to try to stop anything from happening. Ultimately, that will only accelerate their collapse.

There is an inherent ineptitude at work here that rewards competencies that are unproductive, if not counterproductive. All of these cheating scandals we're hearing about are but an example. Most students admit to such behavior, and while education may denounce such behavior, it rewards students for playing a very cynical game. The Soviets did the same thing for seventy-five years with their education system. In both instances, students were rewarded for paying their dues, whether with good grades or with good socialist behavior. It's the very nature of the organizational design that creates this kind of behavior. You get what you reward. The behavior you reward creates your standards. This is beginning to dawn on business, and the behavior fostered by education is viewed as detrimental to economic competitiveness.

Easterling: Do you think we can have faith in the marketplace to ameliorate the social inequities that education is expected to redress now?

Perelman: I have faith -- in the same sense that people like Hamilton, Madison, and Adam Smith had faith -- that free people, on average, are likely to make the best choices for themselves from the choices available. I do not naively believe that free people will always make the right choice, whether in terms of what you or I might think is the right choice, or what history might indicate is the right choice. The case for freedom, Jefferson and others said, was that if people can't govern themselves, can't make their own choices, then they would not be capable of choosing leaders who could make choices for them. And that's the whole point.

People ask me, "If we have a free market for learning, won't some people learn the wrong things, or waste their time or money, or just be ignorant?" Sure, it's inevitable; it's the old bell-shaped curve. There are going to be outliers, and some people are going to fall on the short end of the stick, at least at any given moment in time.

On the other hand, you have to ask, compared with what? That's the key point, compared with what? Compared with having a professional bureaucracy decide what's good for people and then shoving it down their throats -- the cod liver oil theory. The problem is that we've tried that approach for a long time now, and we've got what we've got. You say we have inequities in this country now, violence,

people doing drugs, families breaking down -- all of those problems have co-existed with the present system. In fact, that system has caused a lot of those problems.

We want responsible social behavior, but we have institutions that deny people responsibility for their own behavior. How do you acquire the strength and competency to make your own choices, to care for yourself, and to be responsible for your own future when these institutions are continually denying you the responsibility of doing so?

Easterling: Are you saying the marketplace will make the technologies of hyperlearning accessible to the disadvantaged?

Perelman: By and large, the marketplace will lower the prices of a lot of things and make them more accessible to more people. This is what happened with television. We never had a government mandate that everybody in America should have a TV, but 98 percent of American households have one. Only 93 percent have telephones. We've had a mandate for universal telephone access, but market competition provided even greater access to TVs. We have mandates for universal public education, but we have instead a grotesquely unequal system, where the greatest benefits usually are distributed to those who are the most well off, and the least benefits are distributed to those who are the least well off.

[Johnathan] Kozol has every right to complain about what he sees in East St. Louis, but he doesn't realize that it's the product of socialist enterprise. It's government that caused that situation, and government isn't going to cure it. Again and again and again, programs that were created in the name of helping the disadvantaged wound up becoming entitlements for the middle class, and education is almost totally that way. The whole federal student financial aid program has turned out that way.

I advocate in my book a microvoucher idea, similar to the food stamp program, as an alternative to public education. It's simpler and easier to understand what it's about. You don't have separate government farms for poor people or separate supermarkets for the poor. Instead, you give them food stamps and let them go shopping. They can shop anywhere and buy the same stuff as everybody else. The poorer they are, the more stamps they get; the better off they are, the fewer stamps they get. Sure there are problems with the food stamp program, but overall it distributes the most benefits to those who need them, which is more than can be said for public education.

So what I propose is to take all the tax money that is now going to educational institutions, put it in the hands of the people (in the form of microvouchers), and let them go shopping for whatever best suits their needs. Yes, you can have appropriate government oversight, which will no doubt turn out to be somewhat bureaucratic, cumbersome, and wasteful, but my guess is that we could save about half of what we're spending now. We could give better service and still have some money left over for a certain amount of waste and abuse while giving the taxpayers a break.

I think most of us realize that there is good reason for the public to invest in opportunities for the disadvantaged to learn what they need to learn, to at least open the door to the middle class. This isn't the same thing as the argument that opportunity isn't enough, that the disadvantaged have to have the same thing as everybody else does. To me that other argument is socialism, and it doesn't work. If you give people real opportunity, genuine opportunity, most of them have the motivation to seize the opportunity and use it to better themselves.

Easterling: And that opportunity is basically the opportunity to be a customer in the marketplace?

Perelman: Yes! If you want to be middle class, then you want to be a customer. The nice thing about being middle class is that you get to buy things; you get to go shopping. When the Berlin Wall fell and the West German government gave all those East Germans fifty marks to use as they preferred, the East

Germans went shopping, because that's what they wanted to do. You may call that crass materialism, but after all those years of pent up demand, shopping is what made the East Germans happy. The pursuit of happiness isn't happiness, it's just a chance to find what you want.

Easterling: Despite your withering critique of our educational system, I'm surprised to read in your book that you're basically optimistic that the United States is further along in this transformation than are other countries. Why is that so?

Perelman: I have to agree with a point Peter Drucker made more than ten years ago: Our greatest advantage is that we don't have a national education ministry. He repeats this point again in his latest book (*The Post-Capitalist Society*). The very feebleness of our educational institutions has contributed to our success. It's ironic that the reformers want us to catch up with the Germans and the Japanese, who have exactly what we don't. Russian kids took a lot more science and math than ours, and look what happened to that centralized system! Our strength is that we have a chaotic system that is highly decentralized, that has weak standards. I said in the beginning of my book that we have the best education system in the world in terms of what we value as Americans and in terms of the kind of society in which we want to live. We give people an opportunity to better themselves. We have a relatively good system because it has so many different pieces to it, and it never closes the door in anybody's face. Every other major industrial nation closes the door at some point. But because we don't close the door, we will always seem mediocre compared with all others.

What is weak about our system -- and, I think, what will ultimately prove to be its fatal flaw -- is that it hasn't embraced modern technology. It's trying to deliver the promise of the modern economy with a desperately archaic infrastructure. That's no worse than all of the world's other education systems. The very loosey-goosey quality of our system at least permits little nodes of innovation, such as community colleges, but overall, we don't put our resources into the best parts of what we have.

The way investments in education are determined at the state and local levels is ultimately on the basis of political squeeze. The squeakiest wheel gets the most grease. The public by and large is bamboozled into thinking that experts somehow make informed investment decisions, but all too often the experts don't really have the right information. This is one of the biggest dangers of socialism, and it's a likely outcome of a system run by a class of government workers whose self-interest lies in milking everyone else. Those people just can't conceive of any fundamentally different alternatives. Just look at some of the public utilities before deregulation, or at the defense industry. They never considered that circumstances might change and that they might have to do business differently. Southern California certainly never considered preparing for the day when the cold war might end.

Easterling: You don't hold out much hope for educators, do you?

Perelman: What many people, particularly journalists, have found surprising is that educators have been at least tolerant of, if not receptive to, what I've had to say. My goal isn't to win educators over or to persuade them of anything in particular. I'm replying to their questions. The education system is full of nice people who are fairly competent and who do their jobs in the system, but it just happens to be the wrong system. It's not their fault; it's just the way it is. The system is obsolete. It's being challenged as never before, and challenges of that magnitude often create fairly violent turmoil because of the big social structure changes that underlie them.

One of the most hopeful signs I see right now is the relatively nonviolent nature of some of these major transformations. So far, for instance, the second Russian revolution has been fairly bloodless. This

new global infrastructure that is emerging makes us much more aware of our interdependence, and thus more inclined to observe the experiences of other places. What we're finding is that hope and opportunity can be found in the marketplace. People have tried many other methods, and those alternatives have failed. Through the process of elimination, they're coming back to the free democratic market economy because it seems to be the best that we've got. This transformation we're undergoing is certainly stressful, but it could be much worse.

Easterling: Let me conclude by asking what advice you would give to 1994 high school graduates. What would you tell them to pursue with regard to further learning?

Perelman: Entrepreneurship, that's the advice I would -- and do -- give to such young people. Entrepreneurship is really the future of economic self-reliance. Entrepreneurial skills are going to be important whether you work for yourself or for somebody else. The times have certainly demonstrated that you can no longer expect to remain with the same paternalistic organization for the length of your career. Most people, no matter how good their education, never develop this set of competencies (in fact, in some cases, the better their education is, the less likely they are to do so).

We have a tradition of entrepreneurship in this country, but academia has largely ignored it. Some community colleges have begun to address the need for entrepreneurial competencies, but compared with the billions we spend to educate people every year, it's really scandalous how little we devote to helping people learn these skills. Vocational education has demonstrated for many years that meaningful, engaging learning environments can be created, that the mind can be nurtured by learning in context. Voc ed folks have been much more effective in showing how technical knowledge is useful, that the things you see in the real world are not abstractions unto themselves but are manifested in the things you touch and use every day. Academicians have been almost a total flop at that. Science and math teachers have started to recognize this, but when they try to implement it, the cultural literacy guys prevent it.

This is the problem of a politically run system. The family, the individual aren't given the freedom to make these choices and these discoveries for themselves. The system rewards the academic stars rather than the voc ed students, and it is those academic stars who end up in the White House and other policy arenas. People who don't have the right degrees from the right schools don't get to make the big decisions, even though they're the ones who really know how things work. This is a very grave economic problem. That's why we've got to free consumers to make their own choices. A national, top-down approach is going to take 200 years to build a consensus. And meanwhile, that approach is going to be bypassed as more and more people leave the system to get what they need elsewhere.

Easterling: Thank you for such a provocative and stimulating conversation. I look forward to continuing this discussion at the conference!